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Speech

Stevens



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SPEECH

OF

THADDEUS STEVENS, ESQ.

IN FAVOR OF THE BILL TO ESTABLISH

A SCHOOL OF ARTS

IN THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA, AND TO ENDOW THE
COLLEGES AND ACADEMIES OF PENNSYLVANIA.

DELIVERED IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES AT HARRISBURG,
MARCH 10TH, 1838.

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REPORTED IN SHORT HAND

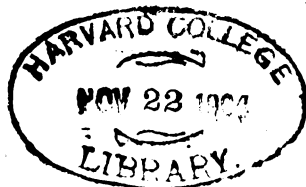
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SPEECH, &c.

MR. SPEAKER, It requires a good deal of courage, or rather insensibility, to address the House in an afternoon session of a sunny day. Yet, although the reasons in favor of this bill have been well and ably urged, and although the objections have been rather insinuated and hinted at, than urged, yet I cannot help fearing that there is more hostility to the bill than it merits. I consider it as the most important proposition, and one most worthy the serious and candid consideration of this House, of any which has yet been brought before it.—One which, in my judgment, more nearly concerns our honor, and the interest of this great Commonwealth, than any that can be brought before it.

I think it is generally admitted that within the last few years, Pennsylvania has acquired more honor by her legislation upon the subject of Education, than she had ever done before; and I cannot help believing, that those under whose auspices that legislation took place, will be gratefully remembered in after times; and that the name of the Governor, who, fortunately, I admit, for the honor and interests of Pennsylvania, gave place to the present firm, intelligent, and independent Executive, when the faults and follies of his party politics shall have been forgotten, will stand out prominently and honorably upon the records of Time, as a great benefactor of the human race, for his bold, manly, and persevering efforts in favor of Education. I trust I may say thus much in justice, without the imputation of flattery.—That gentleman's political sun has set forever. *Power, patronage, and official favor, will never again, to any great extent, be dispensed by him. Now flatterers and sycophants would rather shun and reproach, than approach and applaud him.

But I trust that political prejudice and party rancor will never be permitted to do permanent injustice to meritorious actions. For it should be remembered that the life of public men is a life of calumny and misery. When, therefore, they have retired, let their good deeds be inscribed on tables of brass, and over their errors be thrown the mantle of oblivion. But great and creditable as have hitherto been the efforts of Pennsylvania in the cause of Education, I trust she is not yet exhausted; but while she is only in the vigor of youth in her physical strength, she has not yet attained the maturity of manhood, much less the decrepitude of old age, in her mental energies. But that

this legislature, and many future deliberative bodies here, will go on, acquiring increasing lustre, by their efforts in favor of useful knowledge. The degree of civilization and intellectual cultivation of every nation on earth, may be ascertained, and accurately estimated, by the amount of encouragement which they give, not by individual contributions, for these only show private liberality, but by *permanent laws* to common schools and common education, and to the higher branches of knowledge. Nor does it seem possible to separate the higher from the lower branches of education, without injuring, if not paralyzing the prosperity of both. They are as mutually dependant and necessary to each other's existence and prosperity, as are the ocean and the streams by which it is supplied. For while the ocean supplies the quickening principle of the springs, they in turn pour their united tribute to the common reservoir—thus mutually replenishing each other. So colleges, and academies, furnish and propagate the seeds of knowledge for common schools; and they transfer their most thrifty plants to these more carefully and more highly cultivated gardens of knowledge. I am aware that there are many honest, highly respectable, and somewhat intelligent gentlemen here, and elsewhere, who, while they fully appreciate, and frankly acknowledge the advantages of common schools, doubt or deny the utility of the higher branches of learning.

Mr. Speaker, this subject demands careful examination, and candid argument, and in that spirit I trust we shall meet it. And I believe that a little careful and candid reflection, will convince gentlemen that in all their objections, they err. They object that colleges are schools for the rich, and not for the poor—that classical learning is useless in the common walks of life—that it is soon forgotten—that it tends to produce idleness by promoting pride and vanity;—this is the argument of one gentleman here, and of many elsewhere.

It may be true, that unendowed Colleges are accessible only to the rich; but that shows the necessity of endowing them, and thus opening their doors to the meritorious poor. Extend public aid to these institutions, and thus reduce the rate of tuition; In short, render learning cheap and honourable, and he who has genius, no matter how poor he may be, will find the means of improving it. It can hardly be seriously contended, that liberal education is useless to man, in any condition of life. So long as the only object of our earthly existence is happiness, enlarged knowledge must be useful to every intellectual being, high or low, rich or poor—unless you consider happiness as consisting in the mere vulgar gratification of the animal.

appetites and passions ; Then indeed that man, like the brute, is happiest who has the most flesh and blood, the strongest sinews, and the stoutest stomach. It may be true, and probably is, that the mere literal and verbal part of classic education is soon forgotten, especially in this country, where so few inherit sufficient wealth to raise them above the necessity of constantly following some business to provide for themselves and dependent families : but the impressions which it makes—the noble principles which it inspires, can never be erased from the mind. Besides, it tends to develop the mental faculties and give them a strength, solidity and energy, which they could never otherwise acquire. Just as you see workmen build a massive and high arch over a wooden frame, without which they never could have reared and united it—yet when it is united and becomes dry, it not only retains its shape, but is capable of sustaining almost any amount of superadded useful weight, although the wooden frame work is rotted away or removed.

Never was there a grosser or more injurious error than to suppose that learning begets pride. Ignorance is the parent of pride and disgusting vanity ; he only has censurable pride, who has too little knowledge to know that he is himself a fool. But he who has long and arduously labored up the hill of science, and then found himself but standing upon the threshold of her temple—who, after a toilsome, and perhaps successful examination of the works of nature and of art, discovers that he has scarcely yet entered upon the confines of the inimitable works of an omniscient artist, will surely find nothing in his own weak, blind insignificance, to flatter pride or foster vanity. It is the illiterate, ignorant, senseless, witless coxcomb that struts and fumes, proud perhaps of his ignorance, himself, his baubles, and his folly.

Sir, I trust I need add nothing more to show the advantages of a liberal education. I believe that the proposed permanent mode of providing for the higher institutions of learning, is more useful to the cause of science, and more economical to the State, than the present uncertain mode of appropriations by the legislature. In times of high prosperity these institutions can maintain themselves ; but when the country is overtaken by seasons of adversity, which are inseparable from all communities, and more frequently befall Republics than any other Nations, because their freedom of thought, action, and speculation, renders their course of policy and laws less stable and certain than in more despotic governments—these institutions are obliged to impose increased burthens upon their diminished number of students, or

suspend operations. Men of good talents and high acquirements can with difficulty be found to embark their fortunes upon such uncertain foundations; those, especially, whose daily bread depends upon their daily labour, are entirely excluded; and thus these institutions lose the services of the most learned and industrious teachers. For it will be admitted, that those who have obtained their diplomas in defiance of poverty are more likely to be industrious and learned than their wealthy class-mates.

It seems to me that true economy would be consulted by making appropriations small, but permanent. The present sum proposed is so small as almost to make a Penusylvanian blush to find it opposed.—The thirty or forty thousand dollars, which is asked for all these institutions is a less sum than you appropriate annually to keep in repair a single section of your canals, to be disbursed and expended by a single agent. Though we have appropriated less in all, to Colleges and Academies, than single institutions of other States are worth, yet some of our institutions have received in money and lands, I believe 50, or \$100,000; and being thus full of funds for a while, they flourished in luxury, if not in idleness, and neglected what was necessary for their future prosperity and preservation. But if the same amount had been sparingly, but permanently appropriated—combining the aid of Government with their own industry and economy, these institutions would have been perfectly prepared to meet the adversity of the times. They could have given a *certain living* to their Professors, and they could have been assured, that their situations were permanent. This would add much to the cause of science, and equally, I trust every gentleman here will think, to the glory of the State. These institutions being permanent and prosperous would reduce the price of education, and thus enable the aspiring sons of the poor man to become equally learned with the rich. Then should we no longer see the struggling genius, of the humble, obstructed, and as now, stopped midway in the paths of science; but we should see them reaching the farthest goal of their noblest ambition. Then, the Laurel wreath would no longer be the purchase of gold, but the reward of honest merit. Then the yeomanry of our country would shine forth in their grandeur, the proudest ornament of the nation. In these national workshops of science, the gem of the peasant would be polished, till it out-shone the jewel of the Prince.

I am aware that the too great increase of the number of Colleges is feared by some. I have no such apprehension. With a population increasing as fast as ours is—with a soil and a territory capable of supporting ten millions of inhabitants; with free schools to plant the

seeds and the desire of knowledge in every mind; with discriminating parents to encourage and select those most anxious and best fitted for scientific acquirements, there is little danger that we shall have too many institutions for the education of our youth.

Why, sir, I trust and believe that the time is but just ahead, when our most barren mountains, now without inhabitants, shall swarm with a useful and industrious population, digging and converting into individual and national wealth, the vast treasures now buried beneath their surface. Then, the farmers of the valleys—those who are now called upon to aid in the cause of science and of arts, will be no longer dependant on a foreign market for the disposal of their produce; it will all be wanted to feed those inhabitants of the mountains, who are, and must be, employed in disemboweling the earth of its treasures. With such a teeming population and such riches, there is little danger that we shall have too many schools, but rather, that we shall scarcely find institutions enough to cultivate the youthful mind. But if there were danger, I think this is well calculated to cure the evil. That spirit of economy, I will not say parsimony, which usually governs legislatures, would tend to restrain their multiplication.—Every institution that is hereafter chartered, would be entitled to receive the annuity fixed by this law. That would prevent the incorporation of any unnecessary ones. Now any charter can be procured at first without any appropriation; but this may be continued till they are sufficiently multiplied to control the Legislature and procure lavish appropriations to the danger of exhausting the treasury, if not of breaking in upon the common school fund itself. I hope this House will see that a permanent method of making appropriations, is more useful to science, and more economical than the present mode—surely it would be, more honourable to our law givers, to deem such a subject as this, worthy of a permanent place upon our statute books, than leave it as it now is, with a cold constitutional recommendation to the way-ward care of fugitive legislation.

I cannot help fearing from what we have heard from the gentleman from Venango, as to the inutility of learning, that there is in this community too great and growing an inclination, to undervalue classical knowledge. If we foster this disposition, is there not danger that in some future revolution of the condition of the world, the light of science will be entirely extinguished? When the Barbarians made war, not only upon Rome but upon all learning, what, and who preserved the arts, and sciences, and knowledge of antiquity from utter oblivion? Not common schools, and gentlemen of common

education, useful as they are. During the long and gloomy period of the dark ages, they were preserved and fostered, and finally restored by liberally educated priests, and learned monks; and if they did no other good, we owe the existence of science, as it now is, to them. This light of knowledge is so easily extinguished, and so hard and tedious to be rekindled, that it ought to be as carefully guarded, night and day, as was ever the sacred fire by the vestal virgins.

But ought we not to look beyond the present moment, and inquire into the effect which the arts and sciences are to have upon the posthumous glory of our country? Nations, like individuals, sport but a brief scene upon this stage of action, and then pass away into the oblivion of their own ignorance, or into that immortality which their civilization and intellectual cultivation have provided for them. Little as we think of it now, such will, perhaps, at no distant day, be the fate of this nation. And who does not desire his country to live in the memory of posterity? Does any gentleman think that we shall not, like other nations, feel the frost of time and crumble to decay? As surely as we can judge of the future from the past, the day will come when even civilization will leave us, and travel onward perhaps to some yet undiscovered country; or, having made the circle of the habitable globe, return, re-occupy and refurbish her ancient but now deserted habitations; when, perhaps, as an act of retributive justice, this fair soil shall be retrod by the foot of the barbarian, from which he has been, is being, and I fear will continue to be expelled by Christian treachery, and robbery, and murder. When your richest and proudest cities, though now gladdened and enlivened with the commerce of every clime, shall be like ancient Tyre, or modern Venice; when your vast system of Improvements, which is now annually covered with the richest productions of the fairest land and happiest people on earth, shall be forgotten; when your Canals shall be obliterated ditches, and your Iron Railroads, which, for utility, put to blush the proudest inventions of antiquity, shall be less known and less used than are now the Flaminian, or Appian ways of Rome; when these rich, fertile, lovely vallies, now literally flowing with milk and honey, shall be like the deserted plains of Palestine.

Is there any gentleman who thinks this an idle vision of fancy? Need I remind you of the trite, but eloquent example of Troy, whose very name, and the names of the mighty men who did such deeds of valor around and within her beleagured walls, would now be unknown if they had not been given to fame by the learning of the Grecian

Dard: Her very site was a frequent and a fit theme of antiquarian argument.

If this allusion should be unintelligible to the opponents of this bill—if the writings of Homer should chance to be Greek to them—I pray them to consult their Biblical information, of which, I suppose, they would all be ashamed to be ignorant, and ask, what is now the condition of the once proud, populous, and powerful capitol of Edom, whose armed warriors were the terror of surrounding nations. Till within a few years, for ten centuries, its very location was unknown to the civilized world, notwithstanding its former grandeur. It is true, that discoveries have been lately made, that show us permanent evidences of her former greatness, that I fear we shall not leave behind us. You may now behold her houses, and palaces, and temples, and theatres, and tombs, more magnificent than the dwellings of many nations, cut with immense labor and ingenious art from the solid rock; there, to be sure, they may ever be seen, until, perhaps, the solid granite shall become fluid in the boiling crucible of the Almighty. It is true she is still surrounded by her rock-built ramparts; but they have not passed away with her population, only because they are the work of the Eternal Architect. But where are the descendants of those who once rendered vocal those halls, and palaces, and temples, and theatres? Nought remains of them, but their empty tombs.—no human voice now breaks the silence of that desolation. The owl literally dwells in the house of the rich man, and the dragon reigns in the palace of princes. Viewing such ruin as the doomed fate of Nations, who does not desire to be able to look down this broad and desolating gulph of time, and amidst its destruction, behold his own country forever flourishing like the green and flowery oasis in the midst of a barren desert? Can any one be insensible to these motives? Is there a gentleman within these walls?—Is there a human being any where, whose tabernacle of clay is inhabited by a living soul; that does not anxiously desire to see the fair fame and noble deeds of his native land, instead of being blotted and blurred by Bætian ignorance, recorded in letters of living light, by the bright pen of the historic muse?

I am comparatively a stranger among you—born in another, in a distant state—no parent or kindred of mine did, does, or probably ever will dwell within your borders. I have none of those strong cords to bind me to your honor and your interest—yet, if there is any one thing on earth which I ardently desire above all others, it is to see Pennsylvania standing up in her intellectual, as she confessedly does in her physical resources—high

above all her confederated rivals. How shameful, then, would it be, for these her native sons to feel less so, when the dust of their ancestors is mingled with her soil—their friends and relatives enjoy her present prosperity—and their descendants, for long ages to come, will partake of her happiness or misery, her glory, or her infamy!

How are we to secure for our country this great good—this meed of earthly immortality? Not by riches, which some gentlemen so highly value. Cræsus is remembered only to be despised. What was it that has given such fresh and durable renown to the comparatively circumscribed and barren territory of Athens, of Sparta, of all Greece? Not her wealth. Sparta was more renowned even for her poverty, than was ever the silken Persian with his heaps of gold—it was not her military grandeur; for, sir, great as she was in arms, she was still greater, and is more renowned for her arts and sciences. Which will longest live—the name and the fame of Solon, or of the victors and victories of Marathon and Salamis? Which will soonest die—(if indeed either be destructible) the name of the law-giver of Sparta, or of his fellow countryman, the mighty captain of Thermopylæ?—Whatever may be said of her deeds of patriotic valor, her true and lasting glory will ever be found in her civil institutions—in the wisdom of her laws, her academic groves, the schools and porticos of her philosophers, the writings of her poets, and the forum of her orators. If we are not altogether insensible to such considerations, let us, in our humble way, do all in our power, not only to lay broad and deep the foundations, but to build the beautiful superstructure, and raise high the monuments of science. For, when every thing else that belongs to this nation, shall have yielded to the scythe of the destroyer, their smooth and polished surfaces alone shall withstand the rust, and bid defiance to the tooth of time.

Hitherto, we have considered this subject with reference to our temporary, or perhaps I ought rather to say, our temporal condition. But ought we not to look a little further to see it in its sublimest aspect? Inspiring to all generous minds as are these themes of earthly glory—degrading as is the miser's lust and dastard's fear, in subjects of this kind, yet it seems to me there is one still more ennobling view of it? And, I trust it will not be deemed affectation in me, to suggest whether it be not worthy of, due to, and demanded by the dignity of the legislators of a great and

powerful state, to examine into the effect of liberal and enlarged knowledge, upon the spiritual, the immortal portion of man. If it be true, as I verily believe it is, that in another state of existence, man starts from the same point of intellectual elevation which he may have attained on earth—forms his associations, his enjoyments, and his honors accordingly; if this world be but a state of probation for another and a loftier one, how anxious should we all be, so far as in us lies, to use every means to enlarge our souls, and make them fit companions for celestial beings—to elevate our intellectual statures, so that we may stand proudly up along side of tall archangels? Is this, indeed, the high destiny of man, and shall we suffer ourselves to be degraded, and our souls cramped and shriveled by listening to cold, selfish, miserly calculations of the cost and the value of intellectual—of immortal greatness? What value has wealth, as was well asked by the gentleman from Allegheny, (Mr. WARRS,) unless it be to afford the means of usefulness here, and of happiness and glory hereafter? Gold! Why speak of it! By the unanimous opinion of all decent men, how little, and mean, and despicable is that miser's soul who dotes over its barren heaps?

I have often thought, and wished, that I was the owner or the trustee of the whole mountain of Ophir. I would scatter its yellow dirt upon the human intellect, until, if there be one fertilizing property in it, every young idea should shoot forth with overshadowing luxuriance. But why do we seek arguments, to prove what ought never to be doubted,—the high utility and glory of liberal learning? The necessity to do so contradicts the fondest theories of ancient philosophers. They vainly, it seems, believed that man would go on progressively from one degree of improvement to another, till he attained perfection.

When we compare the arts, and sciences, and knowledge which existed in antiquity, with those of modern times—the architecture and the sculpture of Egypt and of Babylon; the poetry, painting and eloquence of Greece and Rome, with those of modern Europe and America, we are humbled and mortified, at our little advance in any, and inferiority in most of them.

To all reflecting minds, it must be a melancholy consideration, that in the middle of the nineteenth century—amidst the noon-day of the Christian era, we are compelled to raise our feeble voices in defence or in eulogy of that cause which long ages ago was

rendered immortal by the verse of Hómer and the polished prose of Cicero.

“ And must this theme so long divine,”

“ Degenerate into hands like mine ?”

Will any gentleman urge, that any sum, much less this paltry trifle, is too much for such a high, and lofty, and glorious an object? Have we not long enough drank of the bitter waters of avarice and ignorance? And shall a sweeter draft never be presented to us? Yes. Let us go on to exercise the same liberality in this respect that has characterized Pennsylvania in every other, and we shall soon see these little fountains, scattered by our creative hands over this great state, sending forth perennially, forever, their sweet rivulets, till this whole Commonwealth shall become one mighty ocean of Pierean waters. Then will have arrived the true, genuine—the only real intellectual millenium. Would to God we could all live to see its full fruition; but that may not be. Life, at best, is but a span—a few more worthless days, and death's arrow will have touched the youngest and stoutest among us. But, if that happy period should be reserved for posterity, let us do all in our power, and by our present acts give an earnest assurance that it will speedily arrive, and the pleasing anticipation of it will be sufficient consolation for me, and I trust for all of us, amid whatever perplexities we may be doomed to encounter, during the brief period of time yet allotted us upon this little, dirty, despicable earth.

I owe an apology to you, and to this House, for thus long detaining you from that rich intellectual banquet, which, I trust, every man here is about to partake of, by voting for this noble bill, so honorable to ourselves, and so useful for long ages upon ages to come—to civilized, cultivated, intellectual man.



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